

## Bush launches 'No Marriage Left Behind'

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WASHINGTON — Could \$750 million save marriages, or nudge singles toward the altar?

The federal government hopes so, investing hundreds of millions in programs to soften the divorce rate and promote marriage among singles through advertisements, counseling and education in public schools.

The controversial program comes as Internet dating is exploding, and the number of marriages is falling nationally. The divorce rate, meanwhile, has been on the rise since the 1960s, and more children are growing up in single-parent homes.

President Bush wants to do something about it.

In 2001 he introduced his Strengthen Marriage Initiative and called on Congress in 2004 to infuse \$1.5 billion into the program. Partial funding finally came this month: \$150 million each year through 2010.

Sue Maguire, principal of Mount Anthony Union High School in Bennington, said teachers routinely emphasize relationship skills with students.

"I don't know if you need funding to teach good relationship skills to kids. We do that every day," she said.

Maguire added, "I don't know if it's a school's job to promote marriage."

The new program will provide grants to religious groups, high schools and nonprofits that demonstrate they can increase the number of marriages, decrease divorces and prepare fathers for raising children.

Ad campaigns will promote the "value of marriage" and programs will teach relationship and family budgeting skills.

"This family education gives people a whole new level of hope and opportunity," said Nancy McLaren, director of the Loving Well Project at Boston University's school of education.

McLaren, who's been developing school curriculum aimed at strengthening relationships since the 1980s, said the "rise of the divorce culture" started in the

1960s with the concept of "free love," birth control and casual sex.

Marriage as an institution is "struggling," she said.

Funding for the marriage program comes as the Bush administration is proposing deep cuts to social programs for the poor and as educators are protesting what they say is chronic under-funding of school programs.

"These 'marriage promotion' programs are poorly defined and unproven," said Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt. "This money would be better spent on proven strategies, such as education, job training and child care."

The president's budget released last week for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1 proposes eliminating or reducing 141 programs, including the Community Service Block Grant program. The program infused \$630 million into programs this year, providing emergency services to poor residents, including those helped by agencies serving southern Vermont.

"If the Republican leadership truly wants to help families, they should begin by restoring critical programs that millions of working families depend on," said Congressman Bernard Sanders, I-Vt.

But supporters of the president's marriage plan say it acknowledges an urgent need to reverse a growing culture of divorce.

Between 1962 and 1981, the divorce rate nearly tripled in the United States, reaching 1.2 million in 1981. That trend has not significantly retreated.

Vermont's divorce rate was higher in 2004 than 22 other states, according to the Division of Vital Statistics at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For every 1,000 people in Vermont, 3.9 divorces occurred.

Massachusetts has the lowest rate, at 2.2, and Nevada has the highest, at 6.4.